

BACKGROUND

Impact of Growth

Maine is losing its rural character. Vacant downtown buildings are common in many Maine cities. Children can no longer walk to neighborhood schools. Once residential streets are clogged with commuter traffic. Community post offices and stores are being located in strip malls. Farms are being abandoned. Forestlands are changing hands and becoming fragmented. Coastal communities are bursting at the seams. We are losing much of what is good about Maine. We are losing it to suburban sprawl. And not just in southern Maine – it is happening in central, western, and coastal Maine, too, and even in areas of northern Maine around established centers.⁵ The facts speak for themselves.

- ◆ Portland is the 9th fastest growing metropolitan area in the nation.⁶
- ◆ Between 1970-1990, land development in Maine occurred at four times the rate that population increased.⁷
- ◆ Even in a period of relatively slow growth (compared with the pace of the 1980s), upwards of 4,000 new housing units and hundreds of thousands of square feet of commercial and industrial space are being added annually in Maine.⁸
- ◆ Over the past five years, more than 5 million acres of the State's commercial timberlands has changed hands representing almost 20% of the State's total land area.⁹
- ◆ The percent of Maine's population that lives in service center communities has declined to 44% of the State's population (down from 59% in 1960).¹⁰
- ◆ More than half of Mainers never walk to services or shops from their homes.¹¹
- ◆ Nearly one of every two Mainers lives near the coast, while over six million people visit each year.¹²

And the cost to service shifting populations with new roads, schools, and emergency services is enormous. In the state budget, ***sprawl costs more than \$50 million per year*** in duplicative services (school buses, new schools, roads) and it costs municipalities millions more.¹³

Many fear the inevitable. And the trends are not encouraging. As former SPO Director Evan Richert calculated,

“At the present rate, land consumed by development will double again by 2010 and by 2020 much of Maine south of Androscoggin and Sagadahoc counties will look and act like the ring roads around Boston.”

⁵ *Livable Communities: A proposal for addressing suburban sprawl*, Prepared by the Maine State Planning Office, fall 1998.

⁶ Land and Water Resources Council. *Indicators of Livable Communities: A report on smart growth and the impact of land use decisions on Maine's communities, environment, and countryside*, January 2002, p.i.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Maine State Planning Office, *2000 Strategic Plan*, p. 14.

⁹ Maine State Planning Office *2002 Strategic Plan*, p. 14.

¹⁰ *Indicators of Livable Communities*, p.2.

¹¹ *The Maine Survey: Recreational Site*. Prepared for the State Planning Office by Market Decisions, Inc., November 2002.

¹² Maine Coastal Program website, http://www.state.me.us/mcp/about_mcp.html.

¹³ *Indicators of Livable Communities*, p. i.

But unlike Rte 128 and the Massachusetts commuter corridor, *we have a choice*. We can accommodate growth and development while protecting our natural resources. We can protect what's good about Maine's towns –the village centers and the open space around them, the safe neighborhoods, the quiet streets – and still thrive economically.

But time is not on our side. According to experts, we have about 15 years left before we will be unable to reverse the trends of sprawling patterns of development. Ironically, experiences elsewhere, such as in Oregon, show that it takes about 15 years before strategies to combat sprawl begin to have their intended effect. We can avoid becoming a suburb of Boston, but we have to act swiftly and decisively. We must continue what we have started and more.

History of Growth Management Program

The Growth Management Program traditionally has been a local assistance program, assisting towns and cities with developing local comprehensive plans and land use ordinances and reviewing those plans for consistency with the 10 statutory goals.

Local growth management has achieved some notable successes such as:

- Preserving natural resources
- Identifying areas suitable for economic development
- Improving codes enforcement
- Preserving highway capacity
- Expanding waterfront access
- Helping frame local land use issues for community discussion
- Spawning a wide range of local, “grass roots” planning activities and working groups to implement various strategies in comprehensive plans

The voluntary approach to municipal participation has achieved positive results and should continue.

Nevertheless, in its 1999 evaluation, *Continuing Challenges and Growing Opportunities*, the State Planning Office concluded that local planning efforts alone were insufficient. Growth patterns and their impacts often occur and must be addressed on a regional basis. What's more state regulations, policies, and investments unwittingly discourage orderly growth and efficient use of municipal services. It was apparent that public investment (state, municipal, and federal) needed to support carefully planned growth rather than simply respond to the impacts of growth and development.

Over the past four years, SPO has continued assisting towns, but has also redirected staff resources to promote regional coordination and multi-town approaches to planning and to identify and change state policies that work against effective local planning or inadvertently contribute to sprawling patterns of development. Over that time it was guided by four principles.

Guiding Principles

1. That individuals be free to choose where to live.
2. That individuals bear the costs of their decisions.
3. That healthy places do not die.
4. That developers can be allies and partners in implementing public policy.

The Approach¹⁴

We already have a good deal of land use regulation in place. But sprawl, which by its nature spills development over municipal boundaries, is a regional phenomenon. Our land use and environmental laws were not designed to address it. These laws are either strictly local or they focus on specific sites or resources, not general patterns of development.

The path to smarter growth that Maine selected does not rely on more regulation. Maine isn't ready to embrace strict land use regulation that limits growth in one area over another. And the freedom to choose to live where one wishes is too dear to us all. But the twin to this principle is that we should be willing, individually, to bear the costs of our individual decisions. We should not be asking society to pay these costs. So a key component of Maine's approach is to turn to the marketplace where the costs can be properly allocated and individual decisions can be made with more complete knowledge of these costs.

The third principle is that healthy places don't die. If our villages, town centers, and cities are healthy, they will hold their own. Likewise if our rural places with their resource-based enterprises are healthy, they will be more resistant to the germs that are trying to invade them.

Lastly, we recognize that developers don't cause sprawl. They simply seek the path of least resistance in building and selling their products. If resistance in the path that leads to more traditional patterns of development (like the New England village) becomes less, and a market for them exists, they will be allies in the implementation of more responsible patterns of development.

The 5-point Strategy

From 1999-2002, SPO created and implemented a five-point approach to accomplish its statutory charge:

1. Get the State's house in order by reforming state policies, programs, and investments that encourage development sprawl;
2. Aid rural areas by bolstering the health and well-being of Maine's traditional natural resource-based industries;

¹⁴ *Livable Communities: A proposal for addressing suburban sprawl*, Prepared by the Maine State Planning Office, Fall 1998.

3. Strengthen service center communities;
4. Provide relief to suburbanizing communities; and
5. Support the development of traditional, compact, Great American Neighborhoods.

The 5-part package of policy and program initiatives, in more detail, looks like this:

Get the State's house in order by:

- ◆ using state capital investment to support “smart growth”
- ◆ identifying and removing hidden subsidies of sprawl in state funding formulas
- ◆ enhancing regulations so they don't push development outward

Aid rural areas by bolstering the health and well-being of Maine's traditional natural resource-based industries by:

- ◆ regarding them as businesses and assisting them accordingly
- ◆ buying or leasing development rights
- ◆ strengthening the right-to-farm law
- ◆ taxing these industries at current use and reimbursing towns for lost revenue
- ◆ supporting research and development for greater value added

Strengthen service centers by:

- ◆ supporting the “Downtown” initiative
- ◆ expanding home ownership in centers
- ◆ shifting a fair share of costs of providing regional services to the region
- ◆ allowing flexible taxation to spur development

Provide relief to suburbanizing communities by:

- ◆ emboldening local comprehensive plans to protect rural areas and direct most development to growth areas
- ◆ encouraging adoption of strategies that require new arrivals pay a fairer share of costs
- ◆ encouraging communities to use their local authority to direct growth in less expensive ways

Supporting the development of traditional, compact, Great American Neighborhoods by:

- ◆ identifying and educating markets for traditional neighborhood development
- ◆ preparing a design manual about details of traditional neighborhood development
- ◆ preparing a handbook of model ordinances to allow traditional neighborhood development
- ◆ providing incentives for sewer and water lines

Community Planning Principles for Smart Growth

Finally, SPO incorporated smart growth principles into its work tasks. SPO developed the following smart growth principles to help guide its staff in awarding grants and providing technical assistance. The principles are part of the grant program statement, for example, to assist applicants with incorporating smart growth considerations from the start of a grant application through the public vote on the resulting plan or ordinance, to their implementation of land use management strategies.

1. Maintain Maine's historic settlement pattern of compact villages and urban centers separated by rural countryside and sustain a unique sense of place in every community by respecting local cultural and natural features.
2. Target economic and residential growth to compact, mixed-use centers in areas with existing or planned infrastructure and services at a scale appropriate for the community and region.
3. Preserve and create mixed-use, pedestrian-friendly neighborhoods that incorporate open areas, landscaping and other amenities which enhance livability.
4. Invest public funds and provide incentives and disincentives consistent with these principles.
5. Provide choice in the mode of transportation and ensure that transportation options are integrated and consistent with land use objectives.
6. Protect environmental quality and important natural and historic features of the State and preserve large areas of unfragmented wildlife habitat and undeveloped land.
7. Encourage and strengthen agriculture, forestry, fishing, and other natural resource-based enterprises and minimize conflicts of development with these industries.
8. Reinvest in service centers and in downtowns and village areas and support a diversity of viable business enterprises and housing opportunities in these areas.
9. Establish and maintain coalitions with stakeholders and engage the public in the pursuit of smart growth solutions.
10. For municipalities without significant growth pressures and/or small rural communities without substantial infrastructure, smart growth involves consideration of the above principles to the extent that they are applicable. Ensure that the development that does occur is accomplished in a manner that enhances community values, avoids incremental negative impacts, and is consistent with a sustainable and fiscally sound growth pattern.

The nature and influences of how we grow in Maine are diverse, which makes carrying out the Program a challenging one. Yet, the face of Maine's landscape in 15 years will be the result of the decisions we make today. If we don't like what is happening in our communities –sprawling patterns of development, fragmented open spaces, loss of traditional village centers and residential neighborhoods –we must make our choice. We must act now.